

Figures of Speech

Oral History as an Agent of Form in Electroacoustic Music

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Abstract

Reflection on the author's use of oral history recordings as source material in three electroacoustic works suggests ways in which complementary threads of storytelling and recorded memory can be shaped into purposefully directed forms.

The Voice as Source

The approach to electroacoustic composition set out in this article is one centered on oral history recordings relating to events in World Wars One and Two. In this approach extracts from the oral histories are kept intact. They are embedded within composed sound-worlds using electroacoustic sound generation and processing techniques to dramatise the spoken content and amplify emotive resonance. As such, the works discussed lie within, and perhaps hybridize, acousmatic and radiophonic traditions. In articulating the way oral history content can be an agent of formal design, I will focus here on the inherent value and significance of oral history recording and on the way the imagery and sentiment of the material used is identified and then sequenced and structured.

It is axiomatic that the voice is a central element of music: not just as carrier of language through song, but as a model of sound production and expressive character. We are strongly attuned to vocal sound production and language, informing schemata that can influence the way musical designs are shaped by composers as well as informing listening strategies in our reception of music. Electroacoustic music is no exception. It enjoys some of its most powerful moments through the projection or emulation of human vocal presence: not solely through direct speech or song but as a source of sonic richness and a catalyst for the hybridization of timbre with vowel formants or the micro-editing of linguistic structures. The human voice has an especially powerful quality when it is projected acousmatically: when the

animate source of its production is removed from view, as in a recording. This radiogenic way of engaging with voice and language has many cultural and emotional consequences: for example the invited presence—via the loudspeaker—of public personalities into the home, the voyeurism of talkback radio, the sinister intensification of personal power through the disembodied broadcasts of real and fictional totalitarianism, or the insidiousness of the acousmatic voice in psychological warfare.

Oral history has a special potential in the electroacoustic music domain. As creations encapsulating memories, insights, and other traces of experience, the uniqueness of oral history documents can invest acousmatic space with a sense of spontaneity while the personalised singularity of the recording also legitimates the fixed medium. That is to say, audio recording—whether motivated by interview, broadcast or self-generated introspection, as affidavit of in-the-moment expression—transforms thought or memory into a singular and potentially precious object. Any oral history document has inherent structure and resonance (layers of reference in narrative, asides, pauses, clarifications; the character, age and eloquence of the subject or the extent to which their history is confessional) [1] and each of these elements can function as an agent in the construction of larger forms. The rich sonic palette of electroacoustic music also functions as a powerful aestheticising agent for oral history. A parallel musical framework has the capacity for expressive intervention to articulate imaginative dimensions of a story and underline emotional implications. In that regard, one of electroacoustic music's advantages is that characteristics of musical design such as motivic identity and transformation, cyclic recurrence, harmonic progression and contrasts of texture can participate in a form either as sonic abstractions or as tangible manipulations of recognisable real-world sourced sound.

The Recorded Voice

My own interest in the recorded voice stems from childhood experience with tape recorders in the early 1970s. The compact cassette had emerged as an affordable and convenient tool for music but also for voice recording and letter-tapes as a kind of personalised way to correspond: offering something of the intimacy of the telephone without the expense of long distance calls and, perhaps because of the capacity for repeated listening and the one-sided dialogue, encouraging the more poetic, reflective and declamatory forms traditionally associated with the written letter. Edison wax cylinder recording machines had, in fact, been advertised for the purposes of correspondence and the creation of domestic audio snapshots at

least before the First World War but today, even with the immediacy of Facetime and other real-time forms of electronic communication, we continue to enjoy *recorded* (ergo infinitely accessible) documents of our experience, for example through the ubiquitous smartphone. As an 11 year old in 1973, my cassette recorder was a play space: creative, somewhat narcissistic and wonderfully magical.

The evocative power of oral history lies not just in reproduction of the inflection, pace and phrasing of the voice as memories unfold—whether as opinions, observations or storytelling—but also in the assumed permanence of the recording itself. The capacity for recording to open a window back in time is compelling and perhaps most poignant through the human voice. As Miriama Young reflects on hearing an 1890 recording of Florence Nightingale, a tendency to locate animate presence in a recording shows us capable of hearing through extremes of technological imperfection and feeling our way behind the acousmatic curtain to ‘complete the “visual” form.’ [2] Media, content and context are holistically bound in summoning the illusion of physical presence.

Young’s perception points to the ontology of the recording as acousmatic bearer of virtual embodiment, presence and mannerism. A further reflection on recording as listening across time past is offered by John Cousins: ‘[We] respond to any recorded artefact with a fundamentally *nostalgic* attitude. This response impacts our awareness of our own mortality and as such, carries deep emotive implications. The recording is an embodiment of moments from the past that can only be recaptured in this objectified form. However, this very nostalgia works as a positive discriminator. It encourages us to ignore the fact that this is an artefact and to embrace it ‘*as if it were a present actuality.*’” [3] While a recording alone may be a conduit to evocative reconstruction of, or re-engagement with, experience the space or context formed around it in an artistic expression opens the possibility of inflecting deeper meanings. George Steiner’s view of the significance of creativity underlines this point: ‘Only two experiences enable human beings to participate in the truth-fiction, in the pragmatic metaphor of eternity, of liberation from the eradicating dictates of biological-historical time, which is to say: death. The one way is that of authentic religious beliefs for those open to them. The other is that of the aesthetic. It is the production and reception of works of art, in the widest sense, which enable us to share in the experiencing of duration, of time unbounded. It is *poiesis* ... which authorises the unreason of hope.’ [4] In these terms, building electroacoustic music around oral history summons three core values, as expressed

by Young, Cousins and Steiner: an imaginative revivification of the individual; re-fabrication of a specious present through the sound document; and the aestheticisation of the document through creative intervention.

Dramatising the document

The fact that the *process* of recalling events, or forming thoughts and feelings into words as captured intact in recording is a key factor in the expressive power of recorded oral history. As William Schneider asserts: ‘Appreciation for the nuances of oral narrative ... can remind us how oral tradition and personal narrative function, and what we may be missing when we focus only on the words preserved in a recording or on a page, as opposed to concentrating on the meaning created when we experience the oral narrative being told, considering why it was told, and to whom.’ [5] These wider meanings associated with sound recording are precisely what can be articulated when an aesthetic framework is formed around and through oral history. From the perspective of electroacoustic music, one of the sharp distinctions to draw is between recording as a support mechanism for creative activity and recording as a means of exploring and examining the structure and characteristics of a voiced narrative. Trevor Wishart touches on this in relation to his piece *Encounters in the Republic of Heaven*, based on the recorded speech of inhabitants of the Northeast of England: ‘I was interested in capturing something about the quality of individual peoples’ voices ... then you find all these people are actually *saying* things—once you record a phrase there is *content*; you can’t completely ignore it.’ [6] Contemporary culture has acquired acute understanding of the recording process: any kind of recorded interview has the capacity to take on a special significance for participants and auditors—its assumed permanence can be an inhibitor to disclosure or an opportunity to set the record straight. But the sense that it is an *occasion* or *performance* gives gravitas to the experience. The basic purpose of taking oral history is the content—experiential memory and reflection—but what is captured is a specific instance of the realisation of that content. From this background, attention will now turn to my own use of oral histories as content in electroacoustic music. The focus throughout is the shaping of form through the weaving together of oral histories, with some reference to the dramaticization of content through electroacoustically transformed sound.

Ricordiamo Forlì (2005)

The stimulus for this work was a visit to the Italian town of Forlì in 2002. My parents met near there in 1944, my father (Alex) an 8th Army soldier, my mother an Italian civilian. The

core of the piece is the description of an event on 10 December 1944 when four German planes bombed the town one month and a day after its liberation. [7] One of my aunts and one of her children died in that raid (her son having been killed earlier in the war while the family were evacuated to a farm in Malmissole, on the outskirts of Forlì). My mother, who was to have visited her sister on 10 December, preferred instead to meet my father, thus avoiding the tragedy. The work's form leads toward narration of that precise event, reserved until its latter stages. In this way I aimed to emphasise the particularity of the individual's experience of war, by moving through phases of a presumed *present* (initially a 'scene' in which a narrator introduces the work from the central piazza of Forlì), *documented past* (via original BBC and New Zealand war correspondent reports), *imagined past* (though evocation of two war stories) [8] and layers of *remembered past* (expressed through my father's oral history). The oral history element of the form was conceived in terms of a 'funnel' (Figure 1) with a gradually intensifying focus on individual experience.

Dates of specific war correspondent reports are increasingly focused toward that of the bombing of my aunt's apartment leading toward the personal impact of that one event. As indicated on the right hand panel of figure 1, polarised themes are emergent throughout reflecting the content and the way it is expressed. A theme of child death, for instance, is recurrent—from the 30 November BBC report relating a funeral procession followed by 8th Army trucks to the iconic Giosuè Carducci poem 'Pianto Antico' and, in the section *Family Story*, the death of my three year old cousin in Malmissole in 1944. In addition to the oral histories, environmental sounds and electroacoustically transformed materials tie together the developing form. Field recordings made in Forlì (especially bells of the Duomo) and the 'kiss' theme from Verdi's *Otello* (recorded on a dilapidated upright piano) are central identities which proved to have a shared significant pitch of C-sharp, allowing for telling integration of spectra. The bells are extended into a range of rich, resonant figures while pitches from the 'kiss' theme are reordered into new melodic forms in addition to appearing in original form. Essential to the notion of the funnel form is the time needed to allow the emergence of the structure (in this case 54 minutes) and the network of sound identities and transformations woven around the concentric content of the narrative. [9] The idea of the funnel form, then, is to act as a kind of subliminal structural progression, initially rooted in the evocation of a place (Forlì) and a generalised oral history, moving toward the specific experiences of an individual looking back on life-changing events.

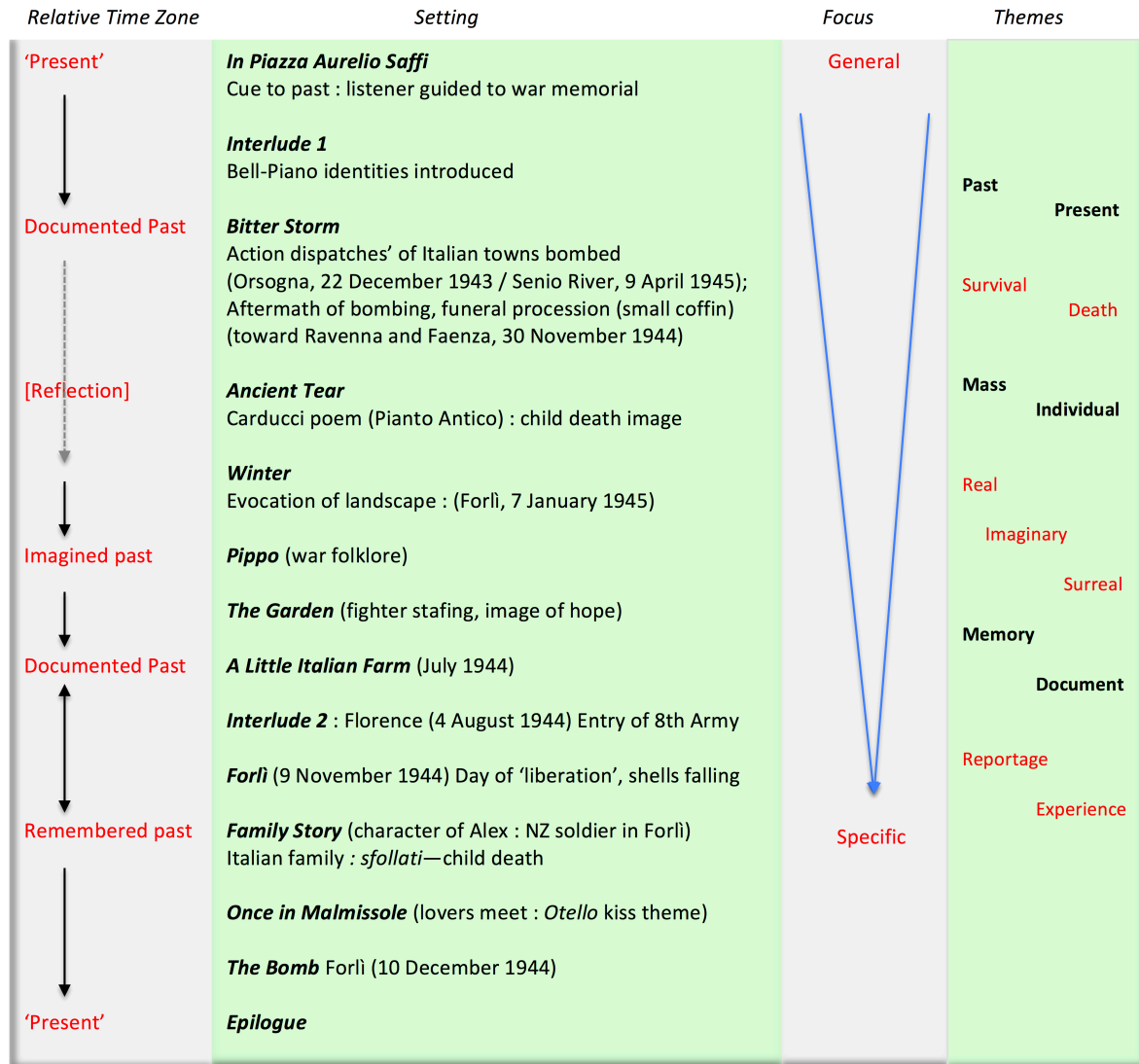


Figure 1 : *Ricordiamo Forlì* - funnel form

An Angel at Mons (2014)

An Angel at Mons is a 15.1 channel audio work framing the oral history of John Ewings, a First World War soldier at the Battle of Mons in August 1914, and one of the few claiming to have witnessed the appearance of an angel at Mons in mid-battle. Various strands of evidence and folklore around the Mons legend have been analysed by David Clarke. [10] What arises is a complex blend of eye-witness accounts and less precise anecdotes of phenomena such as unusual lights, attested to by active soldiers and those who heard reports second hand, including field hospital nurses. Mixed with the machinery of propaganda and war reportage the story gathered momentum following the publication of a short story by Arthur Machen

wherein the emblematic image of an outnumbered English army at the 15th century Battle of Agincourt is evoked in the form of phantom bowmen.

The oral history of John Ewings was taken in 1980 by the BBC when he was a sprightly 101 years old. Ewings left school aged eight to herd cattle in the countryside around his hometown of Sixmilecross in County Tyrone, (now Northern) Ireland. On one occasion the young John, who routinely foraged for food, met a ‘wee man’ who helped him find berries (reckoning he must have been a fairy). The ‘wee man’ offered a premonition of his future—that he would ‘come through a terrible lot and ... lose a lot of blood’ and live to be 100. In his early twenties, seeking better paid employment, Ewings joined the army and was at the Battle of Mons (in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers). [11]

My approach to articulating Ewings’s oral history was determined not just by the content of the storytelling, but also by the style of delivery. It is evident that he had related these events many times before and there is clear intent to create a sense of expectation at key points in the story. The moment at which he describes the angel’s appearance is declaimed almost as though that moment is being relived. I attempted to expand on the sense of expectancy very early in the work by isolating the phrase with which Ewings begins the story—‘well now, I’ll just tell ye’—preceded by a musical introduction in which pure tone impulses grow into more weighty attacks. Later in the work the ‘well’ of ‘well now’ is restored to its original context from the oral history where it heralds the angel story. I also used the premonition of the ‘wee man’ which, though uncontextualised in my work, foreshadows his later war experience. This creates an enigmatic moment in the piece: initiated by Ewings’s phrase ‘He told me’ (to which the listener is likely to query: ‘who told you?’). By raising a question in the mind of the listener in this way I aimed to maintain interest in the potential emergence of a connected storyline. Ewings’s oral history is embedded within an electroacoustic music environment marked by the transformed resonances of sampled metal objects. These are spectrally filtered, pitch-shifted and mixed to create an evolving harmonic and gestural soundscape. The sonority of Ewings’s speech is characterised by a marked sibilance and I elaborated on that by incorporating a range of timbrally related material through a process of frequency-shifting and envelope-shaping of digitally sampled noise. This emulation and extension of his vocal signature aims to suggest the ongoing presence of his persona outside of the passages of recognisable speech. Tight synchronisation between these and other elements of the sound design with the phrasing of the vocal delivery aim to accentuate the work’s non-verbal

sonorities as an extension of memory itself, to imply a sense of the man and his reminiscences embodied in the totality of the sound world.

Ewings's account of the angelic vision is reserved for the final third of the work's 12-minute duration and can be condensed as follows: '... and there was like what we thought a [crack] of thunder and I just looked up, and the clouds parted ... this big cloud parted. And this man came out with a flaming sword. He was like a man. At that time I couldn't say that he had wings on him ... But the Germans, some of them let a yell out and they turned and they fled, and one of them said in English "the world's at an end" ... and they all cleared off. ... Well now what I thought I saw was an angel, but it was a man ... that I could make out. That he was a man.' Although I am naturally interested in the reality of what did or did not appear that day—whether divine apparition or the product of disoriented, hallucinatory terror or home front propaganda—my interest in making this piece was not so much in an objective 'truth.' What interests me is evoking an image of Ewings's persona, his self-belief and the way his story might reflect how he made sense of the life-changing experience of the war.

One of the most poignant reflections on war lies in the sheer scale of damage to the human race relative to individual stories of loss and suffering. So Ewings's account of the Angel at Mons innately captures the sense of one man coming to terms with something that might otherwise be unspeakable. He related the story as an experience but, perhaps unwittingly, as a symbolic one. When Ewings states 'That he was a man' his delivery slows. In the work this informed a moment of cadence followed by a short silence offering space for the listener to reflect on the apparent contradiction of the 'angel-man' image. In terms of his narrative, that moment resonates with what Sergei Rachmaninov referred to as 'tochka': a culminating 'point' in the middle or at the end of a work around which formal design coalesces. [12] The gradual increase in verbal density toward this 'tochka' point is summarised in Figure 2. By identifying the angel as a *man* a human image is conjured amidst an 'inhuman' event in an unexpected, low-key, mysterious way. Metaphorically, then, this runs counter to any notion of the enemy as 'different'—without forgetting that the idea of the enemy as 'other' is the most universal and powerful tool of propaganda.

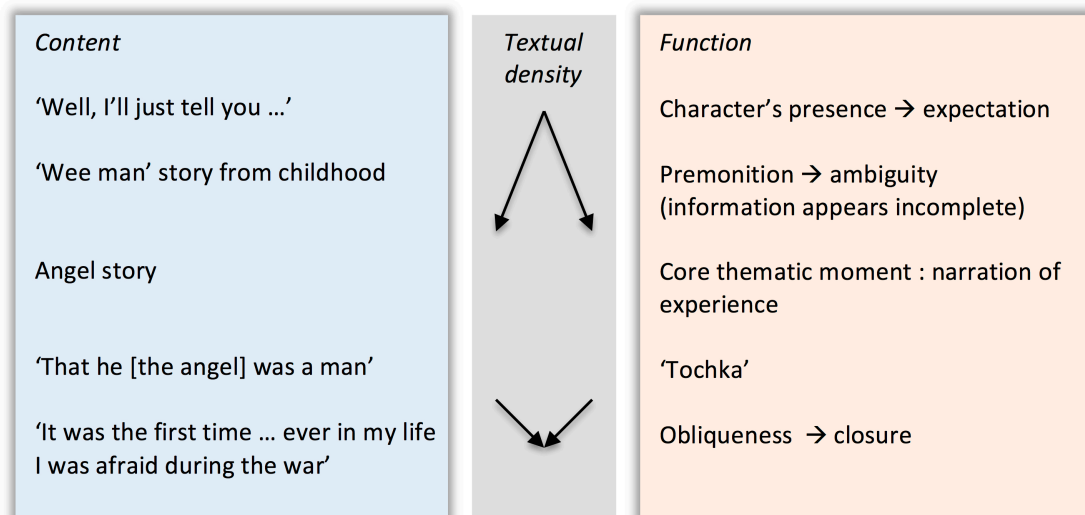


Figure 2 : *An Angel at Mons* – textual form

The overall form of *An Angel at Mons* attempts to capture the feeling of a memory awakening into and receding from consciousness, and a sense of awe at the moment the angel appears. I am aware of the risks in attempting that. As First World War veteran Sir Thomas Armstrong stated: 'There's something false about almost all reported battle scenes: pictures, poems ... they are remembered or reported or recorded in cold remembrance. They are fought in hot blood where the whole person is concentrated upon doing what is required at the moment.' [13] Bearing this in mind we might feel that Ewings gives us something of a cosy story. But his imagery is a profound mix of the supernatural and the human. This 'was an Angel', he is sure, with flaming sword but ... he was a man ... symbolically a hybrid image of divinity and humanity. In Ewings's testimony the Germans were not attacked, they were frightened away, and one spoke in English—the proverbial Tower of Babel's division of the human race for that moment suspended and the battle paused, with an impending moment of self-sacrifice in the face of the enemy averted.

***Red Sky* (2015)**

An Angel at Mons commenced with searches in the oral history archive of London's Imperial War Museum [IWM], which led me to audition many other accounts of First World War experience. Consequently I composed *Red Sky* for alto flute, clarinet/bass clarinet, piano and 14 channels of electroacoustic sound. This 63-minute work addresses the topic of WWI more broadly—as a mosaic of the memories of 20 men and women woven together with the intent of expressing the futility and personal cost of war. The sheer volume of material held at the

IWM meant that my searches for content were guided initially by terms found embedded in the catalogue : ‘attitude to war’, ‘pacifism’ and ‘over the top’ exemplify key words eliciting the reflective content I sought. In my listening sessions, time evaporated as individual webs of memory were spun around me. I needed to listen to all of the personal ‘worlds’ created by each respondent’s oral history to maximise my understanding of their thoughts and reflections in order to justify the use of even a short phrase taken from an account of a specific incident. From these emerged a set of themes offering elements of ‘scene setting’ and description as well as deeper expressions of feelings in response to trauma. There are 31 sections with 20 themed vignettes, nine ‘refrains’ from certain of the themes, an epilogue and a prologue. Continuing the spirit of the funnel form, the formal outline in Figure 3 articulates a broad pattern of increasingly personalised content. A basic underlying subtext is a tension between anonymity and human interconnection with the idea of loss threaded throughout. Powerful imagery such as that of a corpse completely drained of blood in *White*, reference to the frequent presence and song of the lark in *Trenches* or the sight of a large red moon on the eve of the Battle of the Somme in *Red Moon* stand self-sufficiently as telling moments in individuals’ experiences. Description of mass burials and the stench emanating from no man’s land (*Death and Burial/Eight Girls*), a landscape littered with bodies after one of the first gas attacks (*Gas*), sniper hazards and the symbolic freedom of the lark (*Trenches*), the feeling of awe of the sight of barrages from the air and the havoc of flaming petrol dumps on the ground (*Fire*) are more emphatic of anonymity and the overwhelming scale and force of war machinery. The face of a companion suddenly gone with the name found years later on a war memorial (*Lost*), a French family found sheltering in ruins (*People Stories*) and the empty gaze of a dying man (*Last Moments*) hone in on the personal and interpersonal dimensions.

Through contrasts and juxtapositions of imagery in the stream of successive vignettes, I aimed to shape a form that would accentuate this distinction between the individual and the mass. This is also reflected in the refrain *Get Through* where the underlying sentiment is a feeling of vulnerability and loss, and the initial part of *Last Moments* where there is the only mention of a named comrade in the work (other than that of General Haig in *Fire*). Specific dates and place names are positioned sparingly and strategically: in setting scenes but also bringing content back to tangible reference points (as shown in Figure 3).

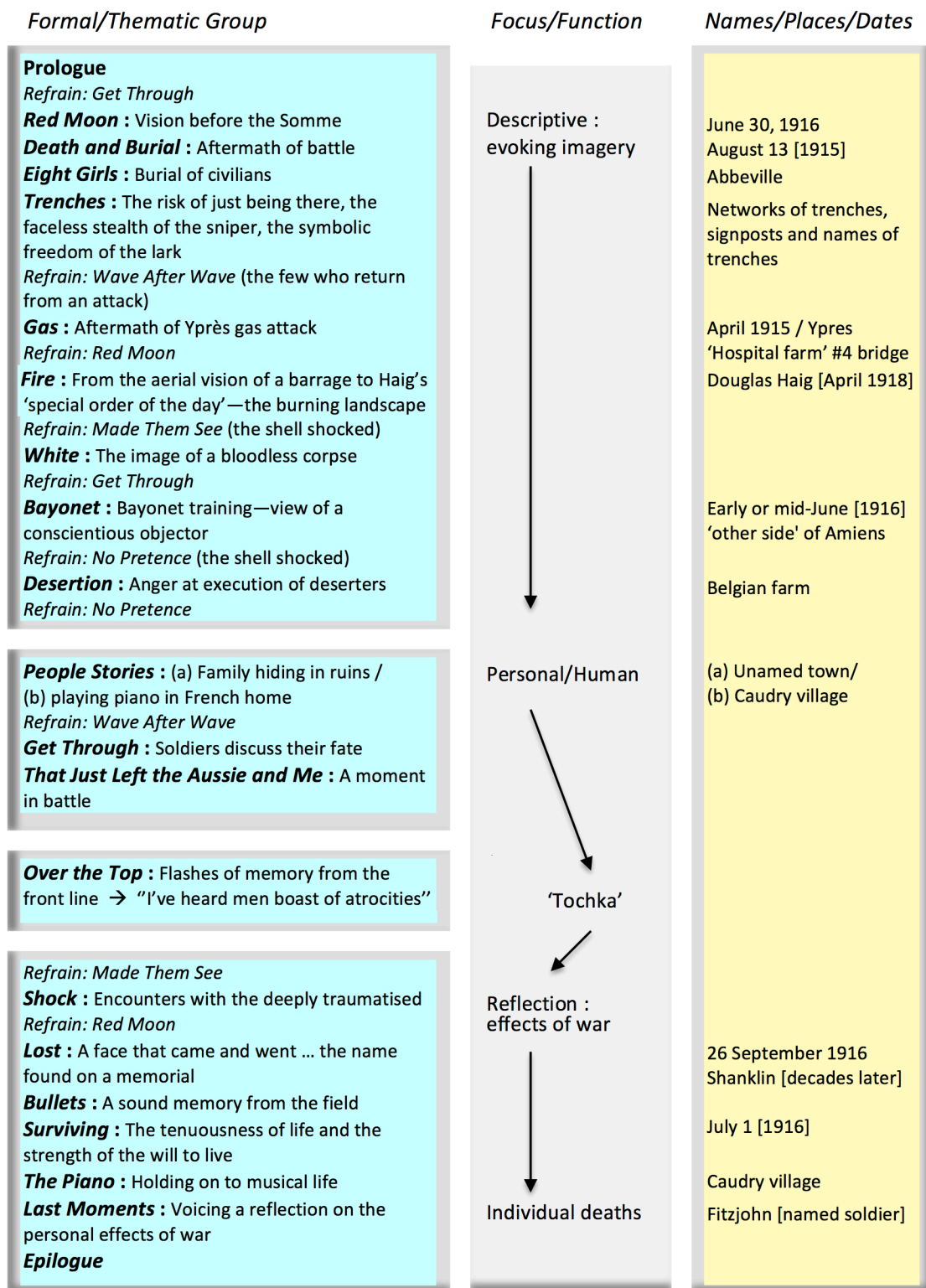


Figure 3 : *Red Sky* outline of form and content

In *Red Moon* the night of 30 June verifies the reference to the start of the Somme offensive, while opening *Death and Burial* with a particular day: 'August, about August the 13th, there was a terrible smell in the air ...' helps reinforce the veracity of the imagery. Similarly the date of 26 September is significant in *Lost*, since the engraved date on a Shanklin [Isle of

Wight] war memorial links to a name (unstated in the work), emphasising the convergence of memory and reality in that oral history.

Since all of these recordings were made some 60 or 70 years after the end of WWI, acceptance, regret, wistfulness and a clear sense that something vital and important about their ongoing experience as survivors meant that they carried a message for those who did not return was palpable in many instances. As documents, these oral histories now stand alone without the possibility of further elaboration or colouration by the individuals. Culturally, however, they invite our participation as though they are ‘present actualities.’ In that sense the formal groupings of *Red Sky* aim to arouse a sense of dialogue in the mind of the listener, through the powerful imagery evoked by eye-witnesses and direct sentiment brought out through the channel of oral history.

Some of the most touching and telling oral history moments are placed at the end of the work in the section *Last Moments* with two separate stories of individuals tending another on the point of death—one the result of injuries in action the other through self-harm. Mixed among their sentiments are the emotional after-effects of survival, the short term cheating of death through witnessing the imminent death of another. But the most disturbing content among the oral histories was a brief, sombre comment from one respondent in which he intimated ‘I’ve heard men boast of atrocities.’ This I placed at the end of the section *Over the Top* attempting to give it emphasis in the work by gradually revealing the entirety of that phrase in progressively longer segments. The intention was to make this revelation the pivotal point in the work’s overall message: that while war inflicts suffering capable of eliciting compassion and nobility it primarily shames humanity. In relation to other content describing the survival instinct, the trauma of loss, extreme mechanised violence, the punishment of deserters by the establishment and consequent psychological damage, the dark and contextually contrary image of atrocities perpetrated from within this respondent’s own ranks offers a moment for reflection in the overall form that again evokes Rachmaninov’s idea of *tochka*.

Conclusion

By taking these oral histories out of the archive and into an artistic arena, my hope is that wider messages can be constructed and communicated through an underlying formal architecture derived from the stories they tell, their expressive impact and genuineness of sentiment. Since oral history of wartime experience inevitably generates imagery of varied

contour and emotional content, fabricating a formal trajectory with such material becomes a complex compositional problem. In these three works, I have proposed two essential devices: the idea of the funnel form and the notion of ‘tochka,’ the latter deployed in these instances as a turning of formal narrative toward unanticipated content (as in the mention of atrocities in *Red Sky*) or a symbolic twist (as in *An Angel at Mons*). The funnel form channels content and imagery from generalities to a specific event or a focus on the experience of an individual. As such it is a means to maintain narrative interest toward the particular rather than offering solely a sequence of stories. These give purpose to the process of creating a distinct structural layer with oral histories: building on the personalities, imagery and emotional content they embody. A further structural distinction can be made between a form that is carried by *composite* content derived from a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, dealing with a set of specific but connected sub-themes as vignettes (as in *Red Sky*) and the *persona-driven* form, evoking the experience of one individual (as in *An Angel at Mons*). In *Ricordiamo Forlì* the funnel form steers the content toward the persona of Alex and his account of the events of 10 December 1944. In these contexts the recording has value beyond mere convenience—it functions as a conduit for memory and the process of memory recall, capable of allowing the vivid imagery of reminiscence to interact with electroacoustic sound design.

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- [7] Details can be found in Marco Viroli and Gabriele Zelli, *I Giorni Che Sconvolsero Forlì: 8 Settembre 1943 – 10 Dicembre 1944* (Cesena: Società Editrice Il Ponte Vecchio, 2014).
- [8] ‘The Garden’ is a retelling of my mother’s return by bicycle to her previously bombed family home in Forlì, at a time she and her family were evacuees (sfollati), only to be surprised by the extent to which the garden was in bloom. The other relates the folklore of a phantom airplane—dubbed ‘Pippo’—probably apocryphal but thought by many Italian civilians to have sinister intent in its sonorous nocturnal presence.
- [9] For further background see John Young, “Inventing Memory: Documentary and Imagination in Acousmatic Music.” In Mine Dogantan-Dack, ed., *Recorded Music: Philosophical and Critical Reflections* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2008) pp. 314-332.
- [10] David Clarke, *The Angel of Mons: Phantom Soldiers and Ghostly Guardians* (Chichester: Wiley, 2005).
- [11] David Clarke has checked regimental records at the National Archives in Kew, London, confirming that Ewings was present at Mons as claimed, email to the author 12 November 2014.
- [12] Geoffrey Norris, *Rachmaninov* (London: Dent, 1976) p. 81.
- [13] Thomas Armstrong, Oral History (London : Imperial War Museum, cat. number 9758, reel 3, <www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009542>, accessed 6 June 2016).

Biographical Information

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